



Local Leaders

Issue Spotlight

Local Leaders,

This is our sixth in a series of emails to elevate core issues we've been working on. Let us know what you think or if there are any other issues spotlights you'd be interested in.

Let's talk about sewage. The last time wastewater technology was overhauled was in the 1980s, and we've learned a whole lot since then. One major lesson? We need to upgrade wastewater treatment plants and address nutrient pollution in our sewage. Twenty years of research has confirmed that our municipal sewage treatment plants are the biggest human source of Puget Sound's nutrient problem – contributing over 80% of the anthropogenic loading of nitrogen to Puget Sound.

What is nutrient pollution?

Nutrients may not always be a bad thing, but the scale of nutrients we flush down our toilets and sinks (like the nitrogen in our poop) can lead to massive algae blooms that suck oxygen from Puget Sound and exacerbate ocean acidification. These effects stress marine life, and we cannot afford to worsen conditions for shellfish, salmon, and orca.

Inadequate urban planning, outdated infrastructure, and the pressures of climate change will only amplify the threat of nutrient pollution without solutions we can address right now.

To learn more, check out this great Crosscut article [HERE](#).

Why this matters for your community?

Washington State Department of Ecology is preparing a new Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit. Our partner organization, Washington Environmental Council, and many others in the environmental community, from RE Sources in Bellingham to the Deschutes Estuary Restoration Team in Olympia, strongly support modernizing sewage treatment. The [Squaxin Island Tribe](#), [Suquamish Tribe](#), and many [allies](#) are also urging Ecology to address sewage pollution immediately because they see impacts to their Tribal Treaty Rights. WCV believes this new permit is the best tool to put the region on a better path to remedy sewage pollution in Puget Sound.

This is a generational opportunity and responsibility, knowing how rarely we overhaul our wastewater systems and given the many decades that these capital investments are designed to last. The federal Clean Water Act and Washington's Water Pollution Control Act include legal obligations to address nutrient pollution.

While this permit will require 58 wastewater treatment plants across Puget Sound to implement nutrient removal strategies, many plants in Washington and across the nation have already tackled nutrient removal. The

technology to remove excess nutrients is readily available, and some methods also reduce pharmaceuticals and toxics like flame retardants that end up in the drain.

Communities from Shelton to Sequim to Spokane have already invested in modern technologies; in fact, 16 of the treatment plants discharging to marine waters already upgraded to this modern technology, including the Olympia area in the 1980s. More recently Pierce County's Chambers Bay treatment facility was designed with the ability to do nutrient removal – Pierce County's leaders knew that nutrient removal would be required in the future, based on Ecology's science and national directions in wastewater treatment, and they knew upgrading the plant technology would only grow more expensive in the future.

Do you know the status of your community's own wastewater treatment plants?

Sewage pollution is also an environmental justice issue. Many wastewater plants are located in areas with higher proportions of people of color. New development in suburban areas can trigger the need to expand the capacity of those facilities – at least under past thinking. Why should new suburban communities that require sewage treatment simply send their sewage to downstream communities who live around existing sewage treatment plants? We need to [rethink wastewater](#) as a resource rather than waste, particularly in the face of climate change, and treat sewage locally. Our sewage treatment systems and infrastructure should not be putting an unfair burden on communities who already bear the worst impacts of other environmental justice and pollution issues.

What are local leadership opportunities on wastewater?

The last time wastewater technology was overhauled, utilities complained that the upgrades were too costly, the science was uncertain, and the technology untested. Instead they placed the blame on other sources. We are already hearing the same stall tactics today with this proposed Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit.

Local leadership is critical for addressing sewage pollution. Here is what you can do to help:

- **Support the new Permit** - We need local leaders to use their voices to say this is our responsibility and we must act now and support this new permit. If you are interested to hear more, we would love to have a more in-depth conversation on this!
- **Advocate for Federal \$\$\$** - Join us in making the case for increased federal funding for wastewater infrastructure. Federal funds have declined over the past decades while the need has only grown.
- **Promote Equitable Utility Rate Structures** – Chat with us about wastewater utility rate structures and best practices for customer assistance programs to reduce the burden on low-income communities. And stay tuned for more on this in the months to come.

Staff Spotlight: Mindy Roberts



Mindy Roberts is the Puget Sound Program Director for both Washington Environmental Council and Washington Conservation Voters. In her previous work as an engineer and scientist, Mindy has worked on wastewater treatment plants and developed computer models of how toxic and nutrient pollution moves around Washington's waters – streams, rivers, lakes, and Puget Sound – and how that pollution

impacts people and communities who depend on clean water. She has a BS in Civil Engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, MS in Civil and Oceanographic Engineering from MIT and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and Ph.D. in Civil and Environmental Engineering from the University of Washington.

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Thanks for reading! We'll continue to share information and resources on critical issues. Let us know what else we can do to be a resource for environmental progress in your community.

Best,
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